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SUBJECT: KURDISTAN ISLAMIC UNION IN SULAIMANIYAH, IRAQI KURDISTAN

This is a Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) Cable.

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The small Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) party has established a platform in favor of reform of the political party system in the Kurdistan Region to promote openness, a stronger economy, and broader political participation, according to several of its members. As a marginal party that has had difficulty obtaining office, it also seeks greater USG involvement in advancing democratic reform of the electoral process in Kurdistan and political institutions. The KIU stated it would like to see the government separated from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the two dominant political parties. The KIU also states it desires to end the influence of the KDP and PUK in the economy, the educational system and the labor market. In any event, the KIU is not in a position to challenge the dominance of the PUK in Sulaimaniyah Province. END SUMMARY.

#### BACKGROUND

12. (SBU) On March 29 and April 22, RRTOff met with members of the KIU, Sameer Salim Ameen, KurdoR.S. Seucani, and Poekhal A.B. Hussein in Sulaimaniyah. Sameer Salim Ameen is a member of the Politburo of the KIU. KurdoR.S. Seucani is also member of the Provincial Council of Sulaimaniyah Province. Poekhal A.B. Hussein is a member of the Kurdistan Islamic Sisters Union (KISU) which is not a political party but an association of women. The KIU, founded formally in 1994, is based in Erbil with offices in all three provinces of the Iraqi Kurdistan region. Its predecessor, the Islamic Union, has existed since 1951 and started having members in the Kurdistan Region in the late 1970s and 1980s. The current KIU leader is Saladdin Muhammad Bahaddin (Secretary General) who was born in Halabja in 1950.

13. (SBU) During the Iraqi legislative elections in December 2005, KIU offices were the target of civilian protesters from the KDP. The protests were in response to the KIU pulling out from the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan, a coalition which included the KDP. Following the party's withdrawal, KIU leaders were assassinated and the KIU headquarters building in Dohuk was burned in January 2006, in the presence of the KDP chief of police and governor.

14. (SBU) In the December 2005 elections, the KIU obtained nine seats in the Kurdistan National Assembly and five seats in the Iraqi Council of Representatives (18 percent of the vote). The party is active among students and in building mosques, clinics and schools in rural areas. KIU interlocutors said they also have a strong following among the workers.

15. (SBU) KIU interlocutors noted that the party receives funding from the Islamic Relief Organization located in Saudi Arabia and Islamic Unions based in Manchester, U.K. through the influence of Dr. Ali Qaradaghi, a Kurd and senior member of the IU. They also said they receive no funds from foreign governments.

15. (SBU) The KIU has used public positions to attempt to present

itself as an ethical, non-corrupt, non-violent, responsive alternative to the KDP and PUK, clearly targeting the perception among many in Kurdistan that the KDP and PUK are corrupt and have failed to deliver jobs and essential services. One KIU member told RRT Off that they cannot support either the KDP or the PUK because of its corrupted ways and internal divisions. The KIU interlocutors claim that their party is now the fastest growing one in Iraqi Kurdistan.

#### GREATER USG INVOLVEMENT

¶5. (SBU) According to the KIU members, the KIU was appreciative of the USG for having assisted with the downfall of Saddam Hussein. They said their expectation remained that the US presence in Iraq would result in a fair and just government for the Iraqi people.

¶6. (SBU) A small party that has found itself cut out of much of the political process by the two larger parties, the KIU does not favor the practice in Kurdistan of deciding in advance how many seats will be allocated to each party on the electoral list and the rank order of candidates within the list. KIU representatives underscored to RRTOff their belief in the important of the role of the USG in promoting democratic governance and reform of the electoral process.

#### FOR AN IRAQI NATIONAL CITIZENRY

¶7. (SBU) The KIU members told RRTOff they want to be on an independent list and be a national party (without changing their name). They said they do not support a sectarian classification and seek to go beyond an Iraq based on divisions of Shia, Sunnis and Kurds. KIU members did acknowledge the Iraqi constitution recognizes the autonomy of the Kurdistan region. However, they stressed their aim is to promote an Iraqi national citizenry with

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members having equal rights and duties, thereby differentiating the KDP and the PUK, which have promoted the strengthening of the Kurdistan region. The KIU interlocutors said KIU has no members outside the Kurdistan region but that they believe in federalism. They wish all Kurds will exercise their full civic rights and promote the freedom of Kurds in Kirkuk to decide on their political future via Article 140 procedures.

#### FOCUS ON IRAQI YOUTH

¶8. (SBU) The KIU representatives expressed particular concern about Kurdish youth because they have "accumulated problems from the Saddam Hussein era but lack a vision for the future." The youth have lost their feeling of being citizens but instead are focused on the economic benefits (fuel, housing) of richer social groups in Iraq and in the U.S., the KIU members added. Focused on economic opportunities, the youth have become weak citizens and are attracted to the better social services abroad, the KIU members noted.

¶7. (SBU) They see two major challenges for the youth: security and income/unemployment. Jobs seem to go to members of the ruling parties as well as educational opportunities. The ruling parties (PUK in Sulaimaniyah Province, KDP in Erbil and Dahuk Provinces) dominate much of the economy in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and membership in these parties is often a condition for a higher income. KIU members expressed their belief that the US should make it a priority in Kurdistan to achieve open access to the labor market and a university education free from party influence. For instance, selection for the Fulbright Program of the US should be free from PUK-KDP political considerations, they said.

¶8. (SBU) RRTOff encouraged the KIU members to contact the Public Diplomacy section of the RRT for further information on educational and cultural exchange programs.

#### SEPARATE PARTIES FROM GOVERNMENT

¶9. (SBU) Members of the KIU told RRTOff it is necessary to free the government from the ruling parties. They support an independent administration with separate legislative, executive and judiciary

institutions. The US can be of assistance in this objective, they added. The US should give money and assistance funds to the government, they continued, not parties. RRTOff replied that the USG does not give money to political parties.

¶10. (SBU) KIU members are against offering assistance projects to corrupt leaders in the KRG and the government of Iraq. They asserted that the current "corrupt regime" in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region does not help citizens prepare for their future life and civic responsibilities. The KIU encouraged USG representatives to meet with the students and understand their views. They noted, however, that the US could not replicate a Western political system in Iraqi Kurdistan.

#### COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) The KIU's platform for political reform and greater openness in the political process and in the economy in the KRG has earned the party a strong following among youth and in rural areas in Sulaimaniyah Province. This is likely due in part to increasing public cynicism about KDP-PUK party politics and disillusionment by many about the failure of these parties to deliver on promises of essential services.

¶12. (SBU) The KIU appears to be a well-respected by the working classes and intellectuals in Sulaimaniyah Province and is likely to attract more members if the youth in Iraqi Kurdistan become disenchanted with and lack access to the upper ranks of the dominant Kurdish political parties and denied opportunities in the labor market and the educational system. The KIU could also attract more women as the party has seven of them in the politburo as compared to zero in the other local parties. Nevertheless, , the KIU is not in a position to challenge the dominance of the PUK in Sulaimaniyah Province, given the PUK's powerful hold on patronage, the provincial budget and the security forces.